

LGBT Psychology and Feminist Psychology: Bridging the Divide

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LGBT Psychology and Feminist Psychology: Bridging the Divide

Abstract

In this paper, we outline some of the similarities and differences between lesbian and gay psychology (more recently known as LGBT psychology) and feminist psychology. Both fields developed in response to the oppressive practices of psychology; however, lesbian and gay psychologists have been far more willing to using the theoretical and methodological tools of mainstream psychology than have feminist psychologists. Feminist psychologists have enthusiastically embraced qualitative and critical approaches, whereas, until recently, lesbian and gay psychologists have been more cautious about adopting these approaches. Both feminist psychologists and lesbian and gay psychologists have debated which theories and methods best fits with their goals for social change, and both have fought for and won professional recognition. Feminist psychology and lesbian and gay psychology have remained largely distinct from each other; however, there have been some encouraging signs of late – including this Special Issue – that suggest the gap between these two fields may be lessening.

LGBT Psychology and Feminist Psychology: Bridging the Divide

In this introduction to the Special Issue we chart some of the similarities and differences between lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) psychology and feminist psychology, outline the divide between the two fields, and signal recent developments in both fields that suggest some exciting possibilities for bridging the divide.

Similarities and differences between lesbian and gay psychology¹ and feminist psychology

Just as feminist psychology developed in response to women's oppression and to the androcentric bias of psychology, so lesbian and gay psychology developed in response to lesbian and gay oppression and the heterosexist bias of psychology (Kitzinger, 2001). Lesbian and gay psychologists and feminist psychologists have resisted the discipline and practice of psychology (Burman et al., 1996, Kitzinger, 1990). They have challenged psychology's construction of women as inferior to men and of lesbians and gay men as 'sick' and pathological, and the use of science to control oppressed groups. They have challenged the heterosexual male norm, and the concomitant omission and distortion of the lives and experiences of (heterosexual *and* lesbian) women and gay men. In 1970, pioneering second wave feminist psychologist, Phyllis Chesler, took the platform at the annual American Psychological Association (APA) convention to demand that the APA provide:

'one million dollars "in reparations" for those women who had never been helped by the mental health professionals but who had, instead, been further abused by them: punitively labelled, overly tranquilized, sexually seduced while in treatment, hospitalized against their will, given shock therapy, lobotomized, and, above all, disliked as too "aggressive", "promiscuous", "depressed", "ugly", "old", "disgusting" or "incurable" (1989, p. xvii).

Three years later, during the annual American Psychiatry Association convention, a panel of 'experts' debated whether homosexuality should be listed in the

¹ In this section, we use the label lesbian and gay psychology (rather than LGBT psychology) because, as we discuss below, bisexual and trans perspectives have only lately begun to be incorporated into the field.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. One of the participants, Ronald Gold (1973/1999), denounced the illness model of homosexuality as 'a pack of lies, concocted out of the myths of a patriarchal society for a political purpose. Psychiatry – dedicated to making sick people well – has been the cornerstone of a system of oppression that makes gay people sick' (p. 178). On the whole, however, lesbian and gay psychologists (particularly in the US) have been far less critical of, and far more willing to work within and use the tools of, psychology, than have feminist psychologists. Many feminist psychologists have asked whether 'feminist psychology' is a contradiction in terms (e.g., Fine and Gordon, 1991; see Kitzinger and Perkins, 1993, in relation to lesbian psychology).

In their use of theory and method, lesbian and gay psychologists and feminist psychologists have responded very differently to the oppressive research practices of psychology. Although some feminist psychologists at the beginning of the second wave clung to mainstream values and called for more and better science (e.g., Weisstein, 1968/1993); in the UK especially, many others attacked the 'distancing, distorting and dispassionately objective procedures' (DeVault, 1996, p. 34) of mainstream research. They characterised the 'hard' statistical and experimental approaches as 'masculine' and sought to replace them with 'soft' qualitative (supposedly) 'feminine' approaches (Kitzinger, 1990). Feminist researchers argued that qualitative methods and interpretative paradigms were more likely to respect the meanings of (female) research participants.

As Kitzinger (1990) pointed out, heterosexual feminists' methodological critique was less popular among lesbian psychologists: they 'had less investment in being "soft" or "feminine"' (p. 121), and quantitative methods had been used very little in research on lesbians and gay men. Before 1969, about a quarter of all studies on lesbianism/male homosexuality relied exclusively on interviews (e.g., psychiatric case studies), and interviews and questionnaires together accounted for about 75% of research in this area (Shively et al., 1984). Lesbians 'were only too aware that some of the most virulently anti-lesbian investigations had never sullied their work with a dehumanizing statistic or contaminated their intuitions with a controlled experiment' (Kitzinger, 1990, p. 121). Some of the earliest work by lesbian and gay psychologists challenging the pathological model of lesbianism/male homosexuality used statistical and psychometric methods (e.g., Hooker, 1957; Hopkins, 1969), and attacked the methods of pre-1970s psychology as unscientific (see Clarke, 2002). Peel (2002) notes that the use of such mainstream methods allowed 'ideas subversive at the time' – such as that lesbians and gay men are *not* 'sick' – to be 'couched within a 'palatable' framework' (p. 52).

Following the 'turn to language' in the social sciences (Parker, 1992), many feminist psychologists have enthusiastically embraced constructionist and discursive approaches. By comparison, until lately, lesbian and gay psychologists have continued to share mainstream psychology's preoccupation with quantification, positivism and essentialism. Indeed, many lesbian and gay psychologists explicitly eschew critical perspectives. For instance, Gonsiorek (1994) has condemned critical perspectives as 'offer[ing] a fast lane into obscurity and irrelevance' (p. ix).

Feminist psychologists and lesbian and gay psychologists have vigorously debated which theoretical framework and analytic method best fits with their commitment to social and political change for women and gay men. In recent years, lesbian and gay psychologists and feminist psychologists have argued for the relative merits of qualitative (Coyle, 2000) versus quantitative (Rivers, 2000) research methods, of constructionist (Hegarty, 1999) versus essentialist (Rahman, 1999) frameworks, of relativist (Hepburn, 2000) versus critical realist (Gill, 1995) epistemologies, and of critical/Foucauldian discourse analysis (Gavey, 1989) versus conversation analysis/discursive psychology (Widdecombe, 1995). For instance, in the 1980s and in the early 1990s, lesbian and gay psychologists debated the pros and cons of essentialism and constructionism in relation to the aetiology of lesbianism/male homosexuality (Stein, 1990). That is, are lesbians and gay men 'born that way' or is sexuality – as social constructionists and radical feminists argued – constructed under patriarchy and neither natural nor freely chosen (Kitzinger, 1988); and which of these theories is best suited to advancing our cause? Although the essentialism/constructionism debate keeps resurfacing in lesbian and gay psychology, as Kitzinger (2001) points out, neither side has convinced the other and research now proceeds separately within each tradition. Feminist psychologists have conducted similarly polarised debates around the question of sex differences (see the contributions in Kitzinger, 1994). However, feminist psychologists are generally more open to theoretical and methodological diversity, and embracing a plurality of (often) competing perspectives, than are lesbian and gay psychologists.

Both lesbian and gay psychology and feminist psychology has sought to effect change on and gain recognition within psychology. Both fields struggled to achieve an institutional platform for their work (for lesbian psychologists in the UK this was partly a struggle against feminist psychologists, see below). Feminist psychology and lesbian and gay psychology first achieved official acknowledgment in the US, with respective divisions established within the APA in 1973 (Division 35: Psychology of Women) and in 1984 (Division 44: Society for

the Psychological Study of Lesbian and Gay Issues²). Feminist psychologists and lesbian and gay psychologists in the UK experienced greater difficulty in achieving institutional recognition. This was partly because of their much smaller numbers, and the more stringent regulations of the British Psychological Society BPS (which were tightened after the first proposal for a Psychology of Lesbianism Section was rejected in 1991, Wilkinson, 1999). The Psychology of Women Section was established within the BPS in 1987 after a two-year struggle. The first proposal was rejected in 1985 on the grounds that it was too political (Wilkinson, 1990). The Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section was established 13 years later, after nearly a decade of campaigning (during which the Section proposers received abusive hate mail from other BPS members), three rejected proposals and the biggest 'anti' vote in any comparable ballot in the history of the Society (Wilkinson, 1999).

The divide

Lesbian and gay psychology and feminist psychology remain distinct from each other. Kitzinger (2001) remarks on the gulf between the two fields, noting that 'each proceeds without much awareness of advances in the other, and there is an extraordinary lack of cross-referencing' (p. 272). Lesbian and gay psychology is not informed by feminist concerns (Kitzinger, 2001; Rose, 1996) and few feminist psychologists work within the field (but see Brown, 1987; Kitzinger, 1987; Tiefer, 1978). Lesbian and gay oppression is typically discussed without mention of patriarchy, the different gender status of lesbians and gay men is frequently ignored, and lesbians' experiences as women are often invisible (Rose, 1996). Most feminist psychology continues to assume a generic heterosexual woman, and glosses over, or ignores, lesbians and gay men and lesbian and gay issues (Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective, 1987; Brown, 1989; Fontaine, 1982; Kitzinger, 1996; Peel, 2001; Rose, 1996). In feminist psychology textbooks, lesbians are typically located in the chapter or section on sexuality (the 'token lesbian chapter', Kitzinger, 1996) and are rarely discussed in any other context, such as ageing, relationships, motherhood, and stereotypes. As Brown (1989) argues:

'there are "women", and then there are "lesbians" tucked away in our own chapters of textbooks... Lesbian experiences are seen as unique, offering little to the understanding of the norm. What occurs instead is that we are compared to the norm, in the past to demonstrate our pathology and, more

² Now the Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Issues.

recently, to affirm our normalcy. Or we are simply categorised as an interesting variant of human experience, equal but still separate and always marginal'. (pp. 447-448)

Lesbianism is constructed as a non-political 'bedroom' issue of minor importance to women and feminism. Feminist psychology is, as Fontaine (1982) argued, guilty of 'heterosexism-by-omission' and 'heterosexism-by-sexualisation' (p. 74). In 1991, the Psychology of Women Section played an instrumental role in the rejection of a proposal for a parallel Psychology of Lesbianism Section (Comely et al., 1992), using the familiar argument that by organising autonomously lesbians divert and divide women's energy.

The way forward: Bridging the divide

Lesbian and gay psychology is a rapidly developing field: the field has recently begun to incorporate bisexual and trans perspectives in a meaningful way – hence the new label 'LGBT psychology'. Critical and feminist perspectives are also increasingly popular in the field (especially in the UK). The papers in the Special Issue are based on a Lesbian & Gay Psychology Section symposium on the state of the art in critical LGBT psychology presented at the 2004 POWS conference in Brighton. The aim of the symposium was to showcase cutting edge work in the area and to create the opportunity for dialogue and debate between LGBT psychologists and feminist psychologists. We hope that this Special Issue will create further opportunities for such dialogue. Other recent developments that indicate a lessening of the gulf include the Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section's publication - *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review* - appointing a lesbian feminist Editor (Elizabeth Peel), and a Special Feature in the journal exploring the experiences of heterosexuals working in the field of LGBT psychology (Coyle, 2004).

The journal *Feminism & Psychology* recently published a double Special Issue on marriage that focused both on heterosexual relationships and marriage and on same-sex relationships and legal recognition (Clarke et al., 2004, Finlay et al., 2003a). The editors of the Special Issues highlight heterosexual feminists' and lesbians' and gay men's 'mutual responsibility to each other in political struggles around marriage' (Finlay et al., 2003b, p. 413). Elsewhere in this Special Issue, Clarke (2003, p. 526) argues that 'heterosexuals should be offended by, and take responsibility for challenging, heterosexism...If a society free from heterosexism is a universal good, which I believe it is...you do not have to benefit from it to fight for it'. Heterosexual feminists have begun to reflect on heterosexism in their research (e.g., Braun, 2000; Sandfield and Percy, 2003).

Braun (2000) explores how she colluded in heterosexism in focus group research with women talking about the vagina. Sandfield and Percy (2003) reflect on heterosexism in the accounts of their participants and in their research process itself.

We hope these developments indicate a bridging of the divide between LGBT psychology and feminist psychology. We extend an invitation to members of POWS and to readers of POWSR to submit a proposal for a Special Issue of *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review* on current developments in feminist psychology!

Introducing the contributions to the Special Issue

The Special Issue provides a showcase of current developments in LGBT psychology – it consists of five empirical papers, a review and an interview with the current Chair of the Lesbian & Gay Psychology Section, Peter Hegarty. Victoria Clarke reviews the feminist literature on lesbian parenting over four decades: from the 1970s to the present. Clarke concentrates on lesbian feminist writing, noting that (heterosexual) feminist work on motherhood often excludes or ignores lesbian mothers, assuming a generic heterosexual mother. Clarke explores a shift in emphasis in the literature from supporting lesbian mothers in their fights to win custody of their children to the role of lesbian mothers in reinventing the family. Elizabeth Peel examines the construction of sexualities in slang terminology. Peel collected over 300 slang terms in lesbian and gay awareness training sessions run by specialist trainers for groups of professionals including clinical psychologists and social workers. The groups generated 129 terms for lesbians and gay men, but only 22 terms for heterosexuals. Peel analyses the themes of gender inversion and sexual practice prevalent in the terms for lesbians and gay men. She also considers how the trainers respond to the assumptions embedded in the terms generated and how the trainees resisted participating in the task. Victoria Clarke and Annadis RÚDÓLFSDÓTTIR analyse guidance books written for the (heterosexual) parents, family and friends of lesbians and gay men. Reading the texts through a feminist constructionist lens, they explore how guidance books construct homosexuality and 'coming out' as a lesbian or gay man. Whilst acknowledging that guidance books represent important sources of support for heterosexuals, they interrogate the ideological possibilities and constraints contained in the texts. In two companion papers, Meg Barker and Ani Ritchie explore the experiences of polyamorous women and the methodology they used to research those experiences. Ritchie and Barker discuss their use of participant-centred research, and in particular, participant led focus

groups, to explore the experiences of women who participate in multiple romantic and sexual relationships. The participants were active in every stage of data collection and analysis – generating discussion topics, facilitating the focus group and analysing the transcript. Ritchie and Barker illustrate the potential of participant-owned methods for researching feminist and LGBT topics and focus on issues of accountability and reflexivity when researchers are also participants. Barker and Ritchie present the findings from their participant-led research focusing on two main themes: preconceptions of polyamory (in particular the notion that polyamory benefits men rather than women) and polyamory as woman-centred. The first theme concentrates on the women's responses to outsider perceptions of polyamory, whereas, the second deals with insider perceptions of polyamory as woman-centred because it relies on 'feminine' skills such as organising and communicating. Interestingly, in the course of the focus group the participants realised the gender-stereotypical assumptions embedded in the seemingly positive characterisation of polyamory as women-centred. Ceri Parsons explores the narratives of transsexual women and men from a social constructionist perspective. She examines how transsexual identities come into being through the deployment of various discourses including liberal-humanistic and essentialist discourses. Her argument is that these discourses serve to shore up conventional binary understandings of gender; however, she stresses the importance of viewing deployment of particular discourses in relation to the broader social context. Finally, Meg Barker is in conversation with Peter Hegarty. Hegarty, elected as Chair of the Lesbian & Gay Psychology Section in 2003, outlines his ambitions for the Section and offers some thought-provoking insights on the relationship between science and politics in feminist and LGBT research. These papers introduce some of the exciting work that members of the Lesbian & Gay Psychology Section are currently engaged in – these contributions speak to the concerns and interests of POWSR readers as feminist psychologists. Many of the authors draw on feminist psychological research and investigate topics that fall between the boundaries of feminist psychology and LGBT psychology. Read on and enjoy!

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